

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 BEIRUT 5167

EXDIS DISTRIBUTE AS NODIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, IS, LE, SY
SUBJ: LEBANON: SYRIAN INTENTIONS

REF: DAMASCUS 5129

1. SUMMARY: WHETHER THEY WISHED IT OR NOT,
SYRIANS HAVE BECOME OCCUPYING POWER INTERFERING EXTENSIVELY IN
LEBANESE INTERNAL AFFAIRS. THEIR STATEMENTS TO THE CONTRARY
NOTWITHSTANDING, THEIR FORCES HERE ARE NOT UNDER
LEBANESE CONTROL AND ARE NOT CONSULTING THE LEBANESE
ON THEIR PUNITIVE ACTIONS AGAINST CHRISTIAN MILITIAS.
THEY ARE PURSUING THEIR OWN GOALS, NOT SUPPORTING
LEBANESE LEGALITY. SUPINE ATTITUDE OF GOL IN
THIS SITUATION PUTS US IN AWKWARD POSITION OF
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APPEARING TO BE ADVOCATES FOR CHRISTIANS WHILE
GOL SAYS NOTHING. SYRIANS INITIAL ROLE OF SEPARATING
CHRISTIANS AND PALESTINIANS HAS DEGENERATED TO
ONE OF TRYING TO REPRESS THE MARONITE MILITIAS.
WE DO NOT THINK THIS GOAL IS ATTAINABLE, BECAUSE
ISRAELIS WILL INTERVENE BEFORE IT IS ACCOMPLISHED.
MEANWHILE, SYRIAN CURE IS BECOMING WORSE THAN

THE BITE. MARONITES, DRIVEN TO DESPERATION, AT SOME POINT ARE LIKELY TO EITHER PROVOKE LARGE SCALE FIGHTING OR TO THROW IN THE SPONGE. FIRST SEEMS MORE LIKELY THAN SECOND. WHILE WE DO NOT TAKE SERIOUSLY ISRAELI AND CHRISTIAN CLAIMS SYRIANS ARE OUT TO MASSACRE THE MARONITES, THERE IS GOOD DEAL OF EVIDENCE THEY PLANNING TO MOVE AGAINST THE KATAIB ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. QUESTION IS HOW FAR THEY CAN GO BEFORE ISRAELIS INTERVENE. SOLUTION OF PROBLEM IS BEYOND LEBANESE CAPABILITIES. IT IS IN HANDS OF ISRAELIS, SYRIANS AND MILITIAS. END SUMMARY.

2. I AGREE WITH AMBASSADOR SEELYE THAT THE SYRIANS ARE MOTIVATED BY SELF-INTEREST, AND THAT MAKING LEBANON A CONFRONTATION STATE IS NOT IN THAT INTEREST. NOR CAN I TAKE SERIOUSLY ISRAELI AND MARONITE CLAIMS THAT THEY ARE OUT TO MASSACRE THE CHRISTIANS, OR TO ANNEX LEBANON. THE SYRIANS HAVE ALLOWED THEMSELVES, HOWEVER, TO GET DRAWN INTO A PROCESS THROUGH WHICH THEY HAVE GRADUALLY BECOME THE DOMINANT POWER IN LEBANON. IN SEARCHING FOR A WORD TO DESCRIBE THEIR PRESENT STATUS HERE WE HAVE RELUCTANTLY DISCARDED HEGEMONY AND SPHERE OF INFLUENCE, BUT IT IS SOMETHING BETWEEN THE TWO.

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3. AT THIS WRITING, THE SYRIANS CONTROL SECURITY IN ALL OF LEBANON EXCEPT FOR THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

A. THE MARONITE LIVERLAND (BECHARRE IS THE HEARTLAND) OF JEBAIL, KESROUAN AND THE MATN, WHICH IS CONTROLLED BY THE MARONITE MILITIAS AND THE LEBANESE ARMY FROM THE PRO-KATAIB SARBA BARRACKS;

B. THE PALESTINIAN ENCLAVES IN BEIRUT AND BETWEEN THE LITANI AND THE AWALI RIVERS IN THE SOUTH; AND

C. LEBANON SOUTH OF THE LITANI, THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF WHICH ARE CONTROLLED BY UNIFIL, THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS AND HADDAD'S MEN AND THE ISRAELIS.

THIS MEANS THE SYRIANS CONTROL THE BEKAA AND ABOUT HALF THE AREA WEST OF THE MOUNTAINS, OR ROUGHLY THREE FOURTHS OF THE COUNTRY.

4. WHEN I SAY CONTROL, THE TERM MUST BE UNDERSTOOD LOOSELY. THEY DO NOT REALLY CONTROL EAST BEIRUT OR THE STRING OF CHRISTIAN VILLAGES LYING

EAST OF BEIRUT, SUCH AS HADETH, FOR INSTANCE, BUT THEY ARE IN A POSITION TO PUNISH THE INHABITANTS WITH ARTILLERY. NOR DO THEY FULLY CONTROL THE ZGHORTA-BECHARRE AREA, BUT THEY ARE THERE AS THE STRONGEST MILITARY PRESENCE.

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5. THE SYRIANS ALSO HAVE A VETO OVER LEBANESE FOREIGN POLICY, A VETO OVER THE SELECTION OF A CABINET, AND A VETO OVER THE PRESIDENT. SARKIS WAS THEIR CHOICE AND THEY ARE EXPECTED TO HAVE A MAJOR ROLE IN SELECTING HIS SUCCESSOR WHEN THE DAY COMES.

6. THESE ARE FACTS OF LIFE WITH WHICH THE AVERAGE LEBANESE COULD PROBABLY LIVE, BUT THE SYRIANS HAVE AUGMENTED THEIR TROUBLES BY TAKING ON THEMSELVES THE TASK OF DISCIPLINING A MAJOR SEGMENT OF THE LEBANESE POPULATION, AN ELEMENT WHICH IS ADMITTEDLY IN A STATE BORDERING ON MUTINY AGAINST THE CENTRAL AUTHORITY, AND WHICH IS ENGAGED IN DAILY PROVOCATION OF THE SYRIANS, AS WELL AS OPPRESSION OF ITS LOCAL

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OPPONENTS. THE CENTRAL AUTHORITY IS UNABLE TO DO THE JOB ITSELF, BUT IT DID NOT ASK THE SYRIANS TO DO IT EITHER. OR AT LEAST, IT DID NOT ASK THE SYRIANS TO DO WHAT THEY HAVE DONE.

7. ALTHOUGH THE SYRIANS KEEP SAYING THEY ARE ACTING TO SUPPORT LEGALITY IN LEBANON, THEY ARE ACTING INDEPENDENTLY OF THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT AND WITHOUT MEANINGFUL REFERENCE TO IT. PRESIDENT SARKIS, THEORETICALLY THE SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE ARAB DETERRENT FORCES, HAS LITTLE REAL CONTROL OVER THEM. COL. SAMI KHATIB, THE NOMINAL MILITARY COMMANDER, SAYS HE HAS ALL THE POWER OF THE POPE IN MECCA. THE SYRIANS ARE MAKING THE DECISIONS, OFTEN WITHOUT CONSULTING THE LEBANESE, AND THEY ARE INTERFERING IN LEBANESE DOMESTIC MATTERS.

8. IF WE UNDERSTAND CORRECTLY WHAT SARKIS HAS TOLD US, HE HAS AUTHORIZED THE SYRIANS TO RETURN FIRE WHEN FIRED UPON BUT NOT TO ENGAGE IN GROUND OPERATIONS AGAINST THE MILITIAS. WHEN HE GAVE THIS AUTHORIZATION, HE DID NOT EXPECT IT TO BE TRANSLATED INTO BOMBARDMENT OF CIVILIAN QUARTERS. HE HAS SAID, HOWEVER, THAT HE CANNOT EXPECT THE SYRIANS NOT TO RESPOND TO PROVOCATIONS, AND HE IS AFRAID THAT IF HE COUNTERMANDS THE AUTHORIZATION, OR PROTESTS TOO LOUDLY, THE SYRIANS WILL PULL OUT. AT THE SAME TIME, I AM CONVINCED NEITHER HE NOR BOUTROS WANT THE KATAIB AND AHRAR LIQUIDATED, OR EVEN SERIOUSLY WEAKENED, AS LONG AS THE PALESTINIANS ARE NOT SIMILARLY REDUCED IN POWER. FACED WITH THIS DILEMMA, SARKIS WANTED TO RESIGN LAST JULY. IN RETROSPECT, PERHAPS WE ALL SHOULD HAVE LET HIM DO

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SO, BECAUSE HIS UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE DECISIVE ACTION HAS LEFT US IN THE RATHER AWKWARD POSITION OF COMPLAINING TO THE SYRIANS ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE DOING, WHILE THE LEBANESE CONTINUE TO TALK TO THEM IN THE INDIRECT ACCENTS OF LEVANTINE DIPLOMACY, WITHOUT MAKING A CONCERTED EFFORT TO CHANGE SYRIAN ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS. BOUTROS WANTS US TO SPEAK TO THE SYRIANS AND TO WAVE THE ISRAELI MENACE AT THEM, BUT HE DOES NOT WANT US TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION WE

ARE DOING IT AT HIS REQUEST, OR AT SARKIS'S. INDEED, SARKIS WAS VERY UPSET LAST JULY WHEN THE SYRIANS GOT THE MISTAKEN IMPRESSION WE WERE APPROACHING THEM AT HIS REQUEST. SO WE SPEAK TO THE SYRIANS IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY, PEACE, AND STABILITY, WHILE SARKIS SAYS NOTHING, AND THE REST OF THE ARABS CONCLUDE WE ARE SPOKESMEN FOR THE CHAMOUNISTS.

9. THE SYRIANS ORIGINALLY CAME INTO LEBANON TO SEPARATE THE MARONITES AND THE PALESTINIANS (AFTER, OF COURSE, HAVING POURED OIL ON THE FIRE EARLIER IN THE GAME). THEY WERE WELCOMED AS SAVIORS, BUT THAT WELCOME WORE OFF FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, PRINCIPAL AMONG THEM BEING CLUMSY SYRIAN ATTEMPTS AT POLITICAL INTERFERENCE, THEIR CHANGE IN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PALESTINIANS IN THE WAKE OF THE SADAT INITIATIVE, AND SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE INSTANCES OF SYRIAN BRUTALITY AGAINST INDIVIDUAL LEBANESE. (A BRUTALITY, IT MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED, WHICH HAS BEEN FULLY MATCHED BY THE CHRISTIANS.) WHILE THEIR RESIDUAL ROLE OF KEEPING MARONITE AND PALESTINIAN APART REMAINS, AND IS IMPORTANT TO THE MOSLEM POPULATION, TO THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT, TO MANY CHRISTIANS AND TO US, IT HAS FADED INTO THE BACKGROUND AND THE PRINCIPAL SYRIAN FOCUS TODAY IS ON REDUCING THE MARONITE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT. THIS IS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT DEVOUTLY TO BE HOPED FOR,

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PROVIDED THE PALESTINIAN MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT CAN ALSO BE REDUCED, BUT WE DO NOT THINK EITHER OF THESE DESIDERATA IS WITHIN SYRIAN CAPABILITIES. IN PARTICULAR, WE DO NOT THINK THEY CAN PUSH THE FIRST TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION WITHOUT PRECIPITATING ISRAELI INTERVENTION.

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10. MEANWHILE, THE SYRIAN CURE IS BECOMING WORSE THAN THE BITE. THE CHRISTIAN HALF OF BEIRUT AND THE OUTLYING CHRISTIAN VILLAGES ARE LARGELY DESERTED TODAY, PERHAPS 250-300,000 CHRISTIANS ARE NOW REFUGEES IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY AND WINTER IS APPROACHING. (AN EQUAL NUMBER OF SHIA ARE ALSO STILL IN NEED IN THE SOUTH.) SOMETHING URGENT HAS TO BE DONE ABOUT HOUSING AND SCHOOLS FOR THE FALL. UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE AND ABOUT SECURITY IN PARTICULAR IS REDUCING PEOPLE TO DESPAIR AND THEY WILL NOT CONTINUE INDEFINITELY IN THIS STATE. SOONER OR LATER THE MARONITES ARE GOING TO GO FOR BROKE, TO TAKE ON THE SYRIANS ACROSS THE BOARD AND TO PRECIPITATE ISRAELI INTERVENTION ON THEIR BEHALF.

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11. ALTERNATIVELY, THE MARONITES ARE GOING TO THROW IN THE SPONGE AND QUIT. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME SIGNS OF WEAKENED RESOLVE ON THEIR PART IN THE JEBAIL AND BATROUN AREAS. THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF HOTHEADS AROUND WHO HAVE ENOUGH ADRENALIN LEFT TO START SERIOUS FIGHTING WITH THE SYRIANS AT ANY MOMENT, HOWEVER, PARTICULARLY IF THE LATTER START MOVING TROOPS IN NUMBERS INTO CHRISTIAN AREAS. THE QUESTION IS: DO THE SYRIANS INTEND TO DO SO? ARE THEY ENGAGED IN A SALAMI SLICING OPERATION, AS THE ISRAELIS AND MARONITES CLAIM?

12. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO BE CERTAIN, BUT WE HAVE SEEN ENOUGH INTELLIGENCE TO MAKE US SERIOUSLY

CONCERNED THAT THE SYRIANS MAY INDEED HOPE TO MOVE AGAINST THE KATAIB AND THE AHRAR AND THAT THEY ARE LAYING CAREFUL GROUNDWORK FOR DOING SO. THEY ARE NOT CONFINING THEMSELVES TO MILITARY METHODS, HOWEVER. FOR INSTANCE, KAZIM KHALIL, AN ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE CHAMOUNIST, REPORTS KHADDAM HAS SENT A FEELER TO CHAMOUN, THROUGH A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, FUAD LAHOUD, SAYING THE SYRIANS ARE INTERESTED IN CONCILIATION WITH HIM PROVIDED HE DROPS BASHIR GEMAYEL. WE ARE NOT SURE THE REPORT IS TRUE, BUT IT IS WELL SOURCED AND WOULD BE CONSISTENT WITH THE SYRIAN TACTIC OF TRYING TO ISOLATE THE KATAIB. SUCH POLITICAL APPROACHES ARE CERTAINLY BETTER THAN ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENTS, BUT THEY REVEAL AN INTENT TO PLAY A ROLE HERE WHICH GOES WELL BEYOND THAT OF GOOD NEIGHBOR.

13. THE NEXT QUESTION IS HOW FAR SYRIA CAN GO BEFORE ISRAEL REACTS. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT SORT OF RED LINE THE ISRAELIS HAVE DRAWN, BUT IMAGINE THAT
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IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE SCALE OF FIGHTING AND HOW WELL THE MARONITES ARE DOING, BUT WE CAN ALSO CONCEIVE OF THEIR REACTING IF IT BECAME CLEAR THE SYRIANS WERE APPROACHING A POLITICALLY ARRANGED ANSCHLUSS. WE DOUBT THE SYRIANS COULD PULL IT OFF, BUT FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL, A MAJORITY OF LEBANESE WOULD PROBABLY CHOOSE SYRIA. (THE GREAT MAJORITY, OF COURSE, WOULD PREFER TO HAVE NEITHER.)

14. TODAY, IN THE MINDS OF MANY LEBANESE CHRISTIANS, SARKIS IS A SYRIAN STOOGE. THIS IS UNFAIR, BUT HE IS LIKELY TO GO DOWN IN LOCAL LEGEND AS THE MAN WHO PRESIDED INEFFECTUALLY OVER THE DEMISE OF LEBANESE INDEPENDENCE. EVEN WERE HE MORE DYNAMIC, HOWEVER, WE THINK SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM IS BEYOND LEBANESE CAPABILITIES. IT IS IN THE HANDS OF THE ISRAELIS AND THE SYRIANS, AND THE LEBANESE MILITIAS. IF, SOMEHOW, THEY COULD BE BROUGHT TO ACCEPT SOME UNDERSTANDING ABOUT A MODUS VIVENDI HERE, THE LEBANESE PROBLEM COULD PERHAPS BE SETTLED. BARRING SOME DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENTS, SUCH AS CHAMOUN'S DEMISE, HOWEVER, THE PRICE OF SETTLEMENT IS PROBABLY PARTITION, OR FAR-REACHING DECENTRALIZATION.
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